



The Camel in Nabataean Society: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Since ancient civilizations, camels have been one of the best companions to humans because of their multipurpose nature, and therefore they have been the preferred animal. For thousands of years, camels have been valued for their ability to endure harsh desert conditions and were critical to long-distance transport and trade throughout the ancient Middle East. They were used often for long-distance transportation and were preferred over other animals such as horses and donkeys for their patience and ability to endure long journeys through harsh deserts with little water. In ancient times, people used camels for overland trade and everyday life in all Middle Eastern and Arabian societies. This paper looks at the role of the camel in Nabataean civilization. The Nabataeans were a successful trading society based in southern Jordan who had relations with surrounding powers. It evaluates the available evidence to assess the camel's importance across multiple aspects of Nabataean social life and considers how neighboring cultures depicted the camel in relation to the Nabataeans, arguing that this association became more prominent in Roman representations. The findings highlight the important of camels in Nabataean society and trade, and archeological, epigraphic, and funerary evidence indicates potential ritual connections. The study acknowledges the limitations of the evidence, including the worn-away reliefs and the small corpus of figurines.



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Research problem

Previous scholarship has examined the camel in the Nabataean context from different perspectives. Nehmé (2020) examines the evidence for the camel in the Nabataean realm, including its representation in different types of archaeological and historical evidence, while El-Khouri (2026) includes the camel among animals represented in Nabataean art without further details. The present study examines the camel as an essential part of Nabataean subsistence, nutrition, transport, and trade, and assesses its broader role in Nabataean society. It argues that, despite the camel's fundamental importance to Nabataean life and the development of long-distance trade, it does not appear to have been adopted as a distinctive royal or political emblem on Nabataean coinage. The study also explores how Roman coin representations reflected external perceptions of the camel's association with the Nabataeans and Arabia.

Research Significance

The significance of this study lies in bringing together numismatic evidence, including a coin from the Aqaba Museum together with epigraphic, and iconographic evidence on the Nabataean camel within a single framework, and in distinguishing explicitly between what each type of evidence directly attests and what it may suggest about the camel's symbolic and political meaning. It thereby offers scholars of Nabataean studies and Roman provincial history a cross-disciplinary perspective on the camel's symbolic and representational significance, while also situating the Jordanian archaeological record within a wider Near Eastern and Mediterranean context.

Research purpose

The present study seeks to examine the role of the camel in Nabataean society beyond its economic function, and to assess its possible symbolic significance. It considers the camel's place in everyday life, commerce, artistic expression, ritual practice, and political representation through archaeological, epigraphic, and textual evidence, including terracotta figurines, rock-cut reliefs, inscriptions, funerary finds, and Nabataean and Roman coinage. The study argues that the camel was an important economic resource and means of transport and was fundamental to the development and expansion of Nabataean trade. It further examines how the camel's association with the Nabataeans was represented in Roman coinage before and after the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to examine the role of the camel in Nabataean society. Because the camel was present in many aspects of Nabataean life, the study draws on varied evidence: archaeological, epigraphic, literary, and religious and funerary finds. Numismatic evidence is included because it shows how the camel was represented in relation to the Nabataeans. The analysis is thematic, and each category of evidence is treated in two steps: the evidence itself, then its interpretation, distinguishing what is directly attested from what is inferred. The study's limitations include fragmentary preservation, a small corpus of camel imagery, and reliance on published rather than first-hand data. In addition to published sources, the study draws on numismatic material from the Aqaba Museum, where relevant, to complement the published evidence and support the analysis of camel imagery in Nabataean and Roman coinage.

Introduction

The camel has played an important role in the lives of Arabs since ancient times. Commonly described as the "ship of the desert," it is closely associated with Arab societies (Al-Hashimi, 1978, p. 186). The term "camel" refers to the Old World Camelidae, represented today by three species: the wild Bactrian camel (*Camelus ferus*), its domesticated descendant (*Camelus bactrianus*, also called the Asian camel), and the domesticated dromedary (*Camelus dromedarius*, also called the Arabian or Indian camel), whose wild ancestor became extinct during the first millennium BCE (Sala, 2017, p. 205).

Excavations have revealed camel remains from Neolithic and Bronze Age sites in southeastern Arabia that belong to wild dromedaries. In the Iron Age, the finds show increasing evidence of the exploitation of domesticated dromedaries, identified primarily through differences in size. The most widely accepted arguments suggest that domestication occurred "around the turn from the 2nd to the 1st millennium BC" in southeastern Arabia and after 1000 BC in the ancient Near East (Prust & Hausleiter, 2020, p. 101). The camel was also represented in ancient art, including Egyptian (Ammar, 2012, p. 122) and Mesopotamian (Al-Hashimi, 1978, p. 223).

Arabs valued the camel for its myriad features and extraordinary endurance. Camels are well adapted to dry environments and sandy soils and to the harsh atmosphere of the desert, tolerating long periods without water. These qualities made them well suited to long-distance trade and travel. They were used not only for transportation but also for meat, milk, skin, fat, bones, etc. They were therefore highly versatile animals (Prust & Hausleiter, 2020, p. 101; Ammar, 2012, p. 122). Their

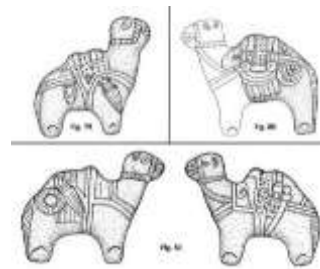
strength and resistance to harsh environmental conditions made them valuable for military purposes. Improved saddles enabled their use as mounts for archers and lancers, as well as for transporting goods and supplies (Sala, 2017, p. 209). Among the societies that integrated the camel extensively into economic and social life were the Nabataeans, who had a strategic position along the caravan routes connecting the Arabian Peninsula with the Mediterranean world. This study examines the role of the camel in Nabataean society. Its contribution lies in bringing together archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic, and textual evidence within a single framework and in distinguishing what each type of evidence directly attests from what it may only suggest. It examines the relationship between the camel's economic importance in Nabataean society and its representation in Roman coinage.

The Camel in the Nabataean Economy and Daily Life

During the Hellenistic period the Nabataeans began to dominate the transport and trade of spices and aromatics from southern Arabia to Mediterranean ports (Al-Salameen, 2004; Gentry, 2017). Goods travelled by sea and overland. The camel, well-suited for long-distance travel across arid landscapes, served as the primary means of overland carriage. Overland transport was more expensive than sea transport, since it involved payments for guards, water and other services, but it connected regions that the sea did not reach (Al-Salameen, 2004, p. 55). The caravan systems linking Arabia with the Mediterranean supported the prosperity that allowed Petra to become a major commercial hub. Excavations in northern Jordan – particularly at the city of Jerash (ancient Gerasa) – uncovered a Nabataean camel figurine carrying amphorae. It was found in the dromos (entrance passage) of the burial of a child aged approximately eight to ten years. The camel figurines may have been toys, but they may also have had a dual function as vessels: the hollow amphorae, an opening on the camel's back, and a spout on its chest, suggesting that they may have functioned as rhytons.

The elaborate burial could indicate that the child came from a wealthy family, and it has been suggested that the camel figurines might even allude to a family business involving the transport of oil or wine (Fowlkes-Childs & Seymour, 2019, p. 76). The amphorae resemble examples found at Jerash and at other Jordanian sites such as Umm Qays, Pella and Amman. Such figurines may have had votive or representational purposes, and they are circumstantial evidence that Gerasa may have functioned as a caravanserai or a hub of overland trade, as suggested by Kehrberg (Kehrberg, 2018, pp.

440–444; Nehmé, 2020, p. 215; Fowlkes-Childs & Seymour, 2019, p. 76) (Fig. 1). Furthermore, Nabataean camel figurines are known from Petra, and one found in a child's tomb, with a parallel at Jerash, may have been a toy or votive object (Nehmé, 2020; Tuttle, 2009). However, representations of camels beyond terracotta figurines existed but appear to have been limited in number. There is no evidence to date of camels on Nabataean painted pottery, which features numerous depictions of plants, birds, and other quadrupeds, and no zoomorphic vessels in the shape of camels have been identified (Nehmé, 2020, p. 222). Despite their limited representation in certain forms of Nabataean art, camels played an important role in the Nabataean economy, serving as a means of transport. Textiles made from a blend of goat hair and camel hair have been found at some Nabataean sites, while camel bones were used to manufacture everyday objects, including scoops and bone rings (El-Khouri, 2026, p. 112).



(Fig. 1): Nabataean camel terracotta figurines
(Nehmé, 2020)

The Camel in Literary and Epigraphic Sources

Camels had long been domesticated and were used to transport goods along overland trade routes. The South Arabian and Nabataean peoples both valued the dromedary (Milleker, 2000, p. 111). The historical significance and central role of the camel in the Arabian world are reflected in early textual evidence related to caravan trade between Mesopotamia and Arabia during the early first millennium BCE. One important source is a text written by the governor of Suḥu and Mari in the second quarter of the 8th century BCE. It tells the story of an attack on a caravan that was trying to avoid the imposed taxes. Following a three-day ambush in one of the villages, the governor and his troops seized the caravan, reportedly obtaining “everything [he] could wish for.” This writing is among the few contemporaneous accounts detailing caravan composition, reporting that approximately 200 camels were accompanied by at least 100 men (Prust & Hausleiter, 2020, p. 102). Diodorus Siculus describes the Nabataeans as raising camels, while Strabo mentions that the Nabataeans used camels instead of horses to provide the services they needed. The camel is also mentioned in several Nabataean inscriptions. One Nabataean inscription

was found in Wadi Rum. The inscription was carved on a stone that was part of a pile of stones placed over a pit containing a coffin and the charred bones of camels. (El-Khoury, 2026, p. 113).

Numerous inscriptions uncovered at different sites in the Kingdom of Nabataea mention the camel in the context of caravan trade. The epigraphic sources provide evidence of the use of these animals by the Nabataeans in the context of the caravan trade. The two Nabataean inscriptions from the site of Umm Jadhāyidh, 150 km northwest of Mada'in Salih, read as follows. The first: "May any man who went to Hegra and any {cam}el be safe, and may Judayyū son of Gab-- son of Ḥayyū be safe." The second inscription: (May any man who went to Hegra and any camel be safe). They both suggest the importance of the camel, which is mentioned alongside the man who leads it, although the two are separated in the text (Nehmé, 2020, pp. 218-19). The Nabataeans used the camel not only for transport across the harsh desert, but also, they used the bones of slaughtered camels as writing material. The excavations unearthed two parts of a single camel scapula at Obada (Avdat) dated to the second half of the second century or early third century CE. The scapula was perforated in one corner and bears the remains of both Nabataean and probably Greek letters etched in parallel lines (Erickson-Gini et al., 2026, p. 111). The second camel scapula bearing writing in Greek describes the hiring out of camels and donkeys to bring grapes from the fields to the press (Erickson-Gini et al., 2026, p. 131).

Camel Reliefs and Their Symbolic Significance

The evidence. Among the most significant Nabataean artistic remains are the sculpted camel reliefs discovered in Petra, the capital of the Nabataean kingdom, at the major bend of the Siq (Anderson, 2020, pp. 39-40). The two groups, approximately 25 meters apart, each depict a pair of camels led by drovers. One relief is carved into the south wall east of the corner, while the other is on the west wall after the road turns northward (Nehmé, 2020, p. 217). Between the two groups, in the corner space, are two rock-cut cultic niches. Scholars have proposed two main interpretations of these reliefs. The first interpretation says that the camels may represent a religious procession, possibly carrying votive objects such as betyls (Anderson, 2020, pp. 39-40). The reliefs on the left bank of the Siq were uncovered in 1997 during clearing works and are slightly larger than life-size (Nehmé, 2020, pp. 207-17). Some scholars argue that the reliefs may commemorate the importance of Nabataean caravan trade by representing one of the few depictions of camel caravans. Most monuments carved in the Siq are niches, often containing betyls, with three carved on the same side as the camels;

the reliefs clearly illustrate camels being led by drovers, highlighting their crucial role in Nabataean society. Similar reliefs of camels and their handlers have been found somewhere in the kingdom, such as in northeast Sakākā, Saudi Arabia (Nehmé, 2020, pp. 207-17; Seland, 2017, p. 111). The reliefs depict drovers leading camels and highlight the important role of the camel in Nabataean life. The choice of camels for a carved scene at the main approach to Petra, which leads to the Khazneh, may reflect the importance of this animal to the Nabataeans, although the erosion of the reliefs prevents a firm conclusion.

The Camel as a Visual Marker of Nabataea and Arabia in Coin Iconography

Coinage served as a local medium reflecting the cultural, economic, political, and religious significance of a territory, particularly following military victories, as it displayed power over newly acquired regions (Bernhard & Butcher, 2015, p. 118). Although the camel was closely associated with Nabataean daily life, it rarely appears on Nabataean coinage. Only one known type of Nabataean coin depicts a camel: a silver quarter-shekel on which the camel appears instead of the traditional eagle. This coin was struck before the monetary reform in the seventh year of King Obodas' reign (Fig. 2). The Nabataeans themselves therefore did not adopt the camel as a regular coin emblem. Its association with the Nabataeans and with Arabia appears mainly in coins issued by the Romans, that is, in an image shaped by outsiders rather than by the Nabataeans themselves (Nehmé, 2020, p. 222; Barkay, 2006). The earliest notable depiction appears on a denarius struck by M. Aemilius Scaurus, Pompey's legate, in 58 BCE. This coin commemorates the surrender of King Aretas III following a Roman expedition against Nabataea in 62 BCE. It shows Aretas III on his knees next to a camel (Fig. 3). The camel here may be interpreted as a royal mount, symbolizing the submission of the Nabataean kingdom to Rome. During the Trajanic period (c. AD 106-108), Roman coinage continued to depict camels alongside the personification of the newly annexed province of Arabia (fig. 4); the entire camel is visible to the left of the personification (Bernhard & Butcher, 2015, p. 119; Nehmé, 2020, p. 222-3; Markowitz, 2020, p. 5). Further, coins from Bostra during the reign of Elagabalus in the early third century CE show figures standing on camels, which have been interpreted as either the divine figure (fig. 5) Dūšarā or the Syrian steppe god Arṣu/Ares (Morey, 2014; Kropp, 2011; Alpass, 2013).

Overall, the evidence suggests that the camel's role as a marker of the Nabataeans was shaped in Roman rather than Nabataean representation. From the Nabataean perspective, the camel was primarily associated with desert trade and economic

prosperity. However, for the Romans, it may have served as a visual representation of a newly organized territory (Nehmé, 2020, p. 222). Although the camel was widely present in Nabataean life, it does not appear to have been a preferred animal for representing royal authority in Nabataean coinage.



(Fig. 2): Nabataean king Obodas III and his wife. Rev. a standing camel (BARKAY, 2006)



(Fig. 3): Silver denarius of M. Aemilius Scaurus (58 BCE). Obverse: King Aretas III kneeling alongside a camel, holding an olive branch and reins. Reverse: Jupiter in a quadriga. (British Museum).



(Fig. 4) Roman bronze coin commemorating the creation of the Roman province of Arabia, AD 106 (Aqaba Museum).



(Fig. 5): Bronze coin of Bostra under Elagabalus (AD 218–222). Reverse: Deity on a camel walking right; legend COL ALEXANDRIANA TRA BOSTRA (19 mm, 7.59 g) (Kropp, 2011).

Sacred Camels: Religious and Funerary Evidence

Camels played an important role in religious rituals across the ancient Near East and Arabia. They were sometimes offered as sacrifices to deities or represented symbolically in ceremonial contexts. The archaeological evidence, including inscriptions, reliefs, and ceremonial objects, suggests their significance not only in economic and daily life but also in spiritual practices. One piece of this evidence is a temple in Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli) maintained by a Nabataean religious community. The temple is

currently submerged. It was dedicated to the main Nabataean deity, Dūšarā, as attested in bilingual inscriptions in both Nabataean and Latin. One such inscription, carved on a Carrara marble plaque and dated to AD 11, records the offering of two dromedaries to Dūšarā by two men bearing typically Nabataean names, Zaydū and 'Abdalgā. The term for "camel", gml, is the same as the Arabic jamal. The inscription employs the verb qrbw (3rd person plural perfect), derived from the root QRB (ق ر ب), meaning "to offer" or "to present". In the Nabataean kingdom and other areas, this verb is used to describe offerings of various objects to deities. The demonstrative 'lh in such inscriptions may indicate the proximity of the object to the text, suggesting that references to camels could refer to figurines rather than living animals. However, the Nabataean inscriptions have not provided, so far, a word for "sacrifice" that would be the equivalent of Arabic ḍabaḥa. The root QRB may therefore have been used to express this action, as it does, for instance, in Syriac (Nehmé, 2020, pp. 214–15) (Fig. 6).

Numerous Nabataean terracotta camel figurines have been discovered since excavations began in Petra in the 1930s, though none were found in explicitly religious contexts. Tuttle (2009) counted 63 camel figurines, representing 8% of all terracotta objects. Most are moulded, with only three modelled by hand. Some depict camels with harnesses and saddlery (11 examples), others with saddlery and weapons (23 examples), and a few feature mounted figures. These mounted examples may represent military or sportive actions, or possibly even toys, as suggested by a figurine found in a child's tomb, comparable to a similar discovery in Jerash (Tuttle, 2009). Because none of these figurines come from an explicitly religious context, their religious significance remains uncertain; they may nonetheless reflect the symbolic value of camels. A small bronze camel foot (2.5 × 2.5 cm), excavated from the main burial of a tomb in Jabal al Khubthah, Petra, is believed to have been part of a bronze figurine placed with the deceased. Camel bones discovered in a tomb below the Khaznah may represent remnants of funerary offerings or a banquet, though their exact purpose remains unclear. Another example is a small leather fragment (4 × 4.5 cm). from a shroud dated to around AD 100–110, found in the north necropolis of Khirbat adh Dhariḥ. On the existing drawing, a passing dromedary is visible, head to the right, accompanied by a checked border pattern (Nehmé, 2020, pp. 212–15). The question of whether camels were offered to deities as live animals or as votive figurines remains open, with scholars considering both possibilities. The presence of the camel in funerary contexts may point to a religious or

symbolic role in Nabataean society, but the evidence does not allow firmer conclusions.

A small fragment of a bronze camel statue unearthed in Petra probably was placed in the grave with the deceased. The presence of camel figurines in tombs may suggest a symbolic link between camels and the deceased (El-Khoury, 2026, p. 115), although the evidence does not show what beliefs lay behind it. There is also evidence that camels were grave goods for high-ranking individuals in South Arabia, buried with or near their owner to prevent their passing into the possession of someone else. Many South Arabian funerary reliefs show the deceased riding a camel, and Nabataean inscriptions scratched on rocks by travellers along the caravan routes are sometimes accompanied by drawings of camels. A bronze camel figurine of the first century BC or AD shows an individual riding bareback behind the hump of his dromedary, which he guides with a long stick that he holds in his right hand. The rings around the muzzle and upper neck of the beast suggest a halter. Similar figurines of camels without riders are also known from South Arabian and Nabataean contexts. For example, the Amir, a tribe in Yemen, dedicated camel figurines to their deity to ensure the well-being of their herds, and the dedication of camel figurines is also recorded by the Nabataeans (Milleker, 2000, p. 111).



(Fig. 6): Nabataean inscription CIS II 157 from Pozzuoli (Nehmé, 2020)

Conclusion:

The archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic record suggests that the camel had an important role in Nabataean society, beyond its practical function in transport and trade. The camel played an important part in the caravan systems connecting Arabia with the Mediterranean, which supported the economic prosperity that allowed Petra to become a major commercial hub. Archaeological representations, however, in the form of terracotta figurines and rock-cut reliefs, may suggest wider symbolic connotations. The location of the Siq reliefs near cultic niches may suggest that camel imagery could participate in religious and commemorative contexts, even though the exact interpretation of these scenes remains debated. The numismatic evidence points in a different direction. The camel appears on only one

type of Nabataean coin, where it replaces the traditional eagle on the quarter shekel, and it does not appear to have been adopted as a regular emblem of royal authority on Nabataean coinage. After the Roman annexation of Nabataea, Roman coinage depicted the camel alongside the personification of Arabia. Earlier, the denarius of Scaurus (58 BCE) had shown it beside Aretas III. The camel's association with the Nabataeans and with Arabia therefore appears mainly in Roman representation, which may reflect Roman perspective of territory and imperial authority rather than a Nabataean self-image. Religious and funerary evidence adds another dimension. The inscription from Puteoli records an offering of two dromedaries to Dūšarā, though it may refer to figurines rather than live animals, and camel remains and figurines in funerary contexts at Petra may suggest a ritual role for the animal beyond its economic value. These interpretations must be weighed in light of the available evidence. Further research drawing on archaeological material from additional sites may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the camel's cultural significance in Nabataean society.

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